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Vision and Revision

Transmedia Representations of Agency in *The Handmaid's Tale* Novel, Graphic Novel, and Television Series

Abstract

Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale is an iconic feminist dystopian novel that was relevant during its initial publication in 1985 when women's reproductive rights were under attack. However, Atwood's story still resonates years later, especially since it has been adapted myriad times into several mediums, ultimately rendering it a successful and socially appropriate transmedia franchise. When The Handmaid's Tale novel, television show, and graphic novel are directly juxtaposed, the way female characters exercise their agency is conveyed differently—that is, in the novel, it is demonstrated through language; in the television show, it is demonstrated through cinematography, etc.; and in the graphic novel, it is demonstrated through a combination of words and images. As a result, the user's understanding of feminist agency and autonomy is not only broadened, but also shifts depending on each individual female character, which ultimately celebrates the diversity of ways women can subvert patriarchal oppression. This notion can only be ascertained with a direct juxtaposition of transmedia adaptations of The Handmaid's Tale texts.

Keywords: *feminism, feminist dystopia, transmedia adaptation, Atwood, agency*

*What can medium X do in terms of storyworld creation or representation
that medium Y cannot?*

(Marie Laure-Ryan and Jan-Noël Thon, *Storyworlds Across Media*)

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) is an iconic feminist dystopian novel that has been adapted into a film (1990), an opera (1998), a ballet (2013), a television series (2017-present), a graphic novel (2019), and a sequel novel, *The Testaments* (2019). Since *The Handmaid's Tale* narrative has been adapted several times in different mediums, it is solidified

as a valuable, cultural phenomenon with an important message for women and young girls about female empowerment and resistance.¹ As Marie Laure-Ryan and Jan-Noël Thon (2014) imply with their question that frames this article, transmedia storytelling is an imperative avenue to understand how a text's medium affordances indelibly affect the user's² understanding of a narrative in a franchise. In *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, Henry Jenkins argues that delving into the disparate medium affordances of a franchise is important because "each new text [is] making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole" and "attract[s] multiple constituencies by pitching the content somewhat differently in the different media" (Jenkins 2006, 97-98). This is not to suggest that any one particular medium is better or worse than another; instead, scholars concur that each medium represents a narrative in ways that expand, challenge, or reframe the user's understanding of a plot point, character, or theme. More specifically, in *A Theory of Adaptation*, Linda Hutcheon explores exactly *how* medium influences the way users interact with a text. She explains:

In the telling mode—in narrative literature, for example—our engagement begins in the realm of imagination, which is simultaneously controlled by the selected, directing words of the text and liberated—that is, unconstrained by the limits of the visual or aural. We can stop reading at any point; we can re-read or skip ahead; we hold the book in our hands and feel, as well as see, how much of the story remains to be read. But with the move to the mode of showing, as in film and stage adaptations, we are caught in an unrelenting forward driving story. And we have moved from the imagination to the realm of direct perception—with its mix of both detail and brown focus. The performance mode teaches us that language is not the only way to express meaning or to relate stories. (Hutcheon 2003, 23)

Novels rely on the reader's imagination to process written words by summoning images in the user's mind's eye: what is happening, what characters look like, and what a specific event in the plot must feel like based on what the author has described. While novels are based on written language and imagination, film and television actually produce moving images for the viewer; however, it is still the viewer's responsibility to interpret gestures and body language, inflection and tone, set design, camera angles and movement, costumes, and music, which creates a vastly

¹ *The Handmaid's Tale* novel has "sold more than 8 million copies worldwide" (Alter 2019). In addition, the handmaids' clothing is a symbol of oppression and a way to disconnect women from each other, but when women wear the handmaid's clothing and "flood Congress and state capitols to protest new restrictions on reproductive rights," it means something else entirely: a complex, visual protest of the way patriarchy robs women of their rights and reproductive agency (Alter 2019).

² The ubiquity of 'user' and 'user's' is employed by many transmedia scholars as an umbrella term to encompass readers, viewers, and players.

different experience compared to reading. Likewise, Jon Thompson and Scott McCloud respectively reinforce Hutcheon's point that media matter. Specifically, graphic novels are unique because they "combine text and pictures equally in order to convey a narrative" and that "both words and images are essential" since "both the domains combine to form an inseparable text" (Thompson 2020). In addition, McCloud states that graphic novels "convey information" in order to "produce an aesthetic response in the viewer," which suggests that the reader needs to interpret the words and images together in order to understand the narrative (1993, 9).³

While scholarship has thoroughly proven that medium shapes a user's understanding of how narratives function based on how a user interacts with the text, along with the notion that examining several texts in a transmedia franchise is valuable to how a user understands the plot, characters, and themes, no one has directly compared *The Handmaid's Tale* novel, graphic novel, and television series to explore how the representation of agency⁴ changes in meaningful ways across transmedia adaptations. In discussions of *The Handmaid's Tale* novel, agency is (un)intentionally conceptualized as binary. For example, Allan Weiss asks a series of questions about Offred in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* novel: "Is she a valiant rebel challenging the regime's domination and oppression? Or is she a powerless victim of Gilead's oppression? Or is she instead a willing or unwitting participant in the regime?" (2009, 120). His questions assume that Offred can either be labeled a rebel, *or* a victim, *or* an inadvertent participant in Gilead's regime, which implies that her agency (or lack thereof) is one-dimensional. Unlike Weiss, Libby Falk Jones argues that Offred is "objectified and repressed [...] However, as [utopian] narratives are not purely ideal, neither are these dystopian visions intimidatingly bleak," which means that she is oppressed, but not as much as it might originally seem (1991, 7). She further asserts that in a feminist dystopian society, women can exercise agency through deciding to "break [their] silences," which creates a peripheral narrative to complement the dominant patriarchal narrative, ultimately giving voice to the gender-based oppression female characters experience (Falk Jones 1991, 7).

Instead of continuing to conceptualize agency as binary, along with focusing on how agency manifests in *The Handmaid's Tale* novel alone, I posit that the user's understanding of agency and gender-based oppression changes depending on the medium *and* the sociopolitical context

³ For further discussion of how the medium matters see Bolter and Grusin 1999.

⁴ To date, the discussion of agency is commonly represented as binary. Myriad scholars discuss how agency derives from an individual's conscious effort to make choices about their own lives and bodies, which then implies that if the individual does not have that ability, they do not have agency. In dystopian texts, an individual's ability to make a choice is very limited. See Barnes 2000.

surrounding the text.⁵ Since the widely accepted purpose of the feminist dystopian genre is to “[offer] a potentially radical fiction space in which women can unravel and re-imagine existing power relations,” each adaptation of *The Handmaid’s Tale* must first create the gender-based oppression by taking women’s agency away *before* it can explore ways female characters (re)claim their agency (Mahoney 1996, 29). Although it seems problematic to do so, Raffaella Baccolini argues that feminist dystopias are “transgressive” and have “become the preferred form for an expression of struggle and resistance” because they allow the individual employing the genre to not only demonstrate how patriarchal society systemically oppresses women, but also how women can challenge, dismantle, subvert, or otherwise resist gender-based oppression in myriad ways (2004, 519-520). By engaging with a direct transmedia juxtaposition of *The Handmaid’s Tale* novel (Atwood 1985), *The Handmaid’s Tale: The Graphic Novel* (Atwood and Nault 2019), and *The Handmaid’s Tale* television series (Hulu 2017), I argue users are invited to (re)consider an array of ways women exercise agency against pervasive and systemic mechanisms of gender-based oppression in patriarchal society through language and imagination, a combination of images and language, and cinematography, costumes, lighting, and acting.

1. Establishing gender-based oppression

Each medium represents the landscape of gender-based oppression in different ways. As the medium becomes more visually centered, the representation of gender-based oppression worsens. This allows users who are arguably a part of a more image-driven culture in the 21st century to conceptualize and comprehend the prevalence and permeability of surveillance in society, and specifically, its role in robbing women of their agency.⁶

1.1 *Novel and graphic novel*

Atwood establishes a world of gender-based oppression in *The Handmaid’s Tale* novel through Offred’s eyes. She is a handmaid and as such belongs to the most repressed group in the Republic of Gilead, which takes shape through her simple observations, such as the following: “the guards

⁵ The 1990 film adaptation of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, which is not discussed in depth in this article because of space, received criticism for rebranding it as an erotic thriller, taking out Offred’s voiceovers, and presenting agency as fetishized violence, which ultimately overshadows the nuance of the narrative. However, these decisions are very representative of the sociopolitical landscape of the United States and Hollywood at the time the film was made.

⁶ This is not to say that today’s viewers are incompetent or uneducated, but that the 21st century is becoming more and more visually dominated, and viewers are more visually stimulated.

weren't allowed inside the building except when called, and we weren't allowed out, except for our walks, twice daily, two by two around the football field, which was enclosed now by a chain-link fence topped with barbed wire" (Atwood 1985, 4). The presence of guards, regimented routine, strict rules, the barbed wire, and confined space that women are not allowed to leave unsupervised: all establishes this world as a hostile one from which it is impossible to escape. From Offred's descriptions, readers glean that where the women are confined was once a school, a place of empowerment and education, but which now functions as a prison that keeps women oppressed. This condition also pressures them to view their role in Gilead as an esteemed position, which Offred makes clear when she states, "Where I am is not a prison but a privilege, as Aunt Lydia said, who was in love with either/or;" or "Yours is a position of honor" (Atwood 1985, 8, 13). This suggests that Offred was told that her position in Gilead's regime as a handmaid is a special right or rare opportunity that is revered and greatly respected. It seems that Aunt Lydia, the woman who presides over the handmaids, was instructed by the Gileadean government to present the handmaid's position as something to be celebrated, rather than feared and abhorred, in order to coerce fertile women into embracing the gender-based role that oppresses them. The Gileadean government clearly attempts to distort the hostile and violent reality of what they are doing to these women with specious descriptions and words, such as "honor" and "privilege" assigned to the duty of a handmaid, which is specifically intended to oppress women as women (Atwood 1985, 8, 13).



Fig. 1: Initial scene

Akin to the novel, *The Handmaid's Tale: The Graphic Novel* begins similarly: Offred's agency is taken away because she is in a prison that was once a school. It is now surrounded by barbed wire and chain-linked fences, which keep her contained and prevent her escape. However, in the graphic novel, these aforementioned descriptions of confinement are paired with images that characterize this oppressive world. As depicted in Fig. 1, the aesthetic is intentionally designed to be confining—the colors are limited, and the panels are narrow and tight—and that creates a fearful and claustrophobic environment. More specifically, in one of the panels, the guard's body is foregrounded, he is wearing a uniform with dark colors, and he is holding an automatic weapon, which all demonstrate the power he has that the women behind him do not have. Since his body takes up half the frame, he eclipses some of the handmaids in the background, who are depicted as smaller and inferior to him. This reinforces his power and robs the women of agency. In addition to these descriptions and images that aesthetically create a world that confines women is a panel that was literally not described or implied in the novel, which is the image of a single file line of terrified-looking women. In *The Handmaid's Tale: The Graphic Novel*, Margaret Atwood and Renee Nault bring additional nuance to the story of *The Handmaid's Tale*, which puts into perspective how pervasive control is for these women. The combination of words and images in the graphic novel not only resists the notion that being a handmaid is honorable, but it also seems to directly confront the pernicious, socially-held belief that when a woman is oppressed or abused, she can simply untangle herself from the oppressive environment and leave. The graphic novel adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale* seems to directly confront the myopic conception that Offred is a complacent coward for not leaving Gilead.

1.2 Television series

While *The Handmaid's Tale* novel and graphic novel respectively rely on language, the user's imagination, and a combination of words and images, cinematic mediums have significantly more elements for users to consider when interpreting a text. In *Film Studies: An Introduction*, Ed Sikov (2010) explains that film and television are unique because they visually draw attention to a theme or character through the movement and angles of the camera (cinematography), the way that a set is visually designed (mise-en-scène), and the costumes that actors wear, which contributes to the deeper meaning of a film or television series. Instead of interpreting the words and/or images, audiences must consider the specific affordances of television because it is an inherent part of this medium, such as camera angles, the mise-en-scène, the background score, and even the actor's body language and the inflection they use to

deliver their lines to fully understand how the text wants users to understand gender-based oppression.

Unlike the novel and graphic novel, episode one of the first season of *The Handmaid's Tale*, "Offred," begins with Offred/June's⁷ attempt to flee Gilead with her husband and daughter, Luke and Hannah. Before viewers even catch a glimpse of a person or even the environment, users only hear the raucous sound of police sirens and the revving of an engine, which gives way to an image of a modest car that is speeding down a deserted road in late fall (Morano in Miller 2017). The camera cuts from the speeding car to a series of close-up reaction shots of the family: Hannah looks apprehensive as she is jostled around and clings to her mother's side, while June and Luke crane their necks to frantically look out the back window to see if the police are in view (Morano in Miller 2017). The close-up shots of worried countenance, the fast-paced cutting from one character's reaction to the next, and the sounds of sirens, panicked breathing, and lack of music works together to create a sense of fear. In addition to the fear, the television series as a medium is able to draw attention to how dangerous and steadfast the government is because Gilead has no qualms about spending time and resources on tracking down *one* woman and *one* little girl for their own political ends. By beginning with the attempted escape, the television series is also able to go beyond the sense of fear and danger by highlighting what has been lost for June. Instead of speculating on whether or not June fought hard enough to avoid her fate as a handmaid, the viewer understands that June was never complicit. When the Gileadean law enforcement finally catches her, she tries to plead and fight with them to keep her daughter with her, but they beat her senseless.

After June violently loses her freedom, the camera cuts to a masterfully orchestrated shot that uses lighting, mise-en-scène, and voiceovers to demonstrate the effectiveness and potency of the mechanisms of gender-based oppression. For example, the camera is very still and moves very slowly as it captures June sitting on the windowsill in the middle of an immaculate bedroom with light pouring in behind her. The window frame on either side of her, along with the bed that is foregrounded in the shot, seems to frame and keep her in place, which emphasizes her rigid posture and the mandated uniform of a handmaid. As she sits with her eyes cast down at the floor, she explains in a deadpan tone in a voiceover, "My name is Offred. I had another name, but it's forbidden now. So many things are forbidden now" (Morano in Miller 2017). By introducing herself as Offred, coupled with informing the viewer that she experiences many

⁷ Scholars have determined by a process of elimination and deduction that Offred's name is June, which is the only name mentioned at the beginning of the novel that does not reappear throughout the text.

restrictions, something which is reinforced by means of the room's aesthetics and her wardrobe, she reinforces that she is oppressed as a woman. She also demonstrates that the Gileadean government has gone to great lengths to ensure she remains a subjugated object. The television series encourages viewers to reconceptualize the far-reaching ability and resources of corrupt power to oppress the individual who cannot easily escape or simply overthrow the government.

2. (Re)claiming agency to subvert gender-based oppression

While Offred experiences gender-based oppression in *The Handmaid's Tale*, as the narrative unfolds, she exercises agency from the margins, or from her inferior position, with complexity and nuance. In *The History of Sexuality: Volume I*, Michel Foucault claims that "where there is power, there is resistance," which suggests that power and agency are not mutually exclusive, but can actually occur simultaneously (1990, 95). More specifically, in "The History of Sexuality: An Interview," Foucault reinforces that it is possible to consciously exercise agency and authority within power structures when he claims, "We're never trapped by power: it's always possible to modify its hold, in determined conditions and following a precise strategy," which means that once power is identified, it is possible for a person to choose to work against it (Foucault 1980, 13). Each individual artist/adaptor employing the feminist dystopian genre will address and explore agency in ways that "vary in intensity and approach" (Cavalcanti 2003, 48). The ways that Offred, and other women, exercise agency against gender-based oppression ultimately extend beyond homogenized mechanisms of resistance when under duress in society, such as escape or overthrowing ones' captor. Instead, they involve using one's voice and celebrating female sexual pleasure as viable mechanisms of agency because it celebrates and emphasizes female experience and sexuality.

2.1 Using her voice: novel, graphic novel, and television series

One of the ways in which many feminist dystopian texts oppress women is through silencing them; thus, in order to (re)claim their agency and use it to resist gender-based oppression, women must "break silences, to find their individual and collective voices" (Falk Jones 1991, 7). In the novel, one of the most profound moments in which Offred uses her voice is after she and the Commander start a clandestine relationship at his request, without Serena Joy's knowledge. Of course, the Commander seems to develop a twisted longing for Offred. During a particular ceremony, "he reached his hand up as if to touch [her] face," which is not only forbidden, but also extremely dangerous because Serena Joy is present (Atwood 1985, 162). When Offred complies by agreeing to meet the Commander in his office later that night, she consciously

chooses to address his illicit behavior by telling him, “Don’t do that again” (Atwood 1985, 162). Her pugnacious demeanor and statement consciously demand a larger conversation:

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I didn’t mean to. But I find it...”

“What?” I said, when he didn’t go on.

“Impersonal,” he said.

“How long did it take you to find that out?” I said. You can see from the way I was speaking to him that we were already on different terms. (Atwood 1985, 162)

In this conversation, readers discover that the Commander wanted to touch Offred’s face because he longs for her in a sexual way that is not so clinical or ceremonial. Of course, she chose to deny him in the moment, not just because it is a breach of protocol, but also because intimate touches will get her in trouble. In this way, Offred uses her voice to protect herself, which emphasizes that she is not complicit with whatever the Commander wants to do, and, as such, is an active agent because she consciously chooses to admonish him to ensure her own safety. In addition, when the Commander expresses his discontent with how the ceremony operates, Offred uses his desire for her, and his complaints about a system that he had helped to build, against him, with sarcasm and a rhetorical question that draws attention to the heart of inequity within this theocracy that benefits men at the expense of women. After she draws attention to his hypocrisy, the Commander does not respond, which indicates that Offred has rendered him silent while she speaks. Offred could have let the Commander get away with his illicit behavior but she did not, which is why speaking out is a form of complex agency, especially since it empowered Offred to be her own advocate in a patriarchal world that usually denies her that right. While it does not allow her to escape Gilead, it demonstrates that she is not complicit and that she is able to work within the power structure to resist gender-based oppression. Just because Offred cannot physically escape Gilead, this does not mean that she cannot use her voice to (re)claim her subjectivity and subvert her object-position.

Similar to the novel, Offred is her own advocate in the graphic novel, which continues to challenge gender-based oppression; however, the graphic novel focuses on Offred’s voice *and* countenance in a way that the novel does not, and arguably cannot, because there is no description of the characters’ respective facial expressions, body language, or dialogue tags. There is an additional layer of interpretation in the graphic novel that is not in the novel, which prompts users to consider ways in which a woman’s voice works in conjunction with subversive body language and facial expressions. In Fig. 2, Offred asserts, “You could get me transferred! To the Colonies. You know that. Or worse,” while the Commander puts his hand on her shoulder and does not appear apologetic or understanding at all (Atwood 2019). In fact, in the panel that

follows, as the Commander tells Offred that the ceremony is “impersonal,” the focus on his mouth implies a whisper and a sexual undertone, which appalls and angers her because he does not understand how dangerous his attempt at intimate contact was for her (Atwood 2019). As she admonishes him, she has her back turned away and a look of contempt on her face, augmenting her assertive words in a way that the novel does not, which puts into perspective the value of using one’s voice to (re)establish boundaries that men think they have the right to cross. In spite of the fact that Offred never faces the Commander in this interaction, the combination of her words and body language is an aggressively resistant choice to his needs and wants. It is the combination of the scathing words and powerful body language she exudes in the images that show readers she may be stuck in this world, but she does not accept the role of a victim, and as such, she exercises agency by being her own advocate. The way she chooses to talk to the Commander and how to present her body in this moment makes it evident that Offred is not a coward who accepts her circumstances; refusing to accept toxically masculine behavior when she cannot physically remove herself from the circumstances is a mechanism of self-empowerment.



Fig. 2: Offred as advocate

Unlike the ways in which Offred uses her voice in the novel and graphic novel, in the television adaptation there are voiceovers that are incorporated consistently throughout the series to expand the notion of ‘voice’ in order to demonstrate that Offred is not complicit. For example, in “Offred” (season one, episode one), Rita says, “You going to stand there all day? It would be rude leaving your friend outside waiting;” then, in a voiceover, Offred affirms, “I want to tell her that Ofglen is not my friend, that I’ve exchanged barely 50 words with her in the two months since I got here. I kinda wanna tell her that I sincerely believe that Ofglen is a pious, little shit with a broomstick up her ass.” Instead, all she says is, “Under His eye,” and leaves (Morano in Miller 2017). In the voiceover, Offred is free to express what she really thinks and to vocalize her frustration with the position that she is in. It is through these honest voiceovers that Offred demonstrates that she is not a complicit person within the regime—that is, these voiceovers indicate that Offred may be complying and doing exactly what she is told, but that in her true heart, she does not wish to be doing this at all. Voiceovers, as a result, are a cinematic affordance that lets the audience know that Offred’s character is free in the confines of her own mind. While this does not lend itself to the conventional nature of escape or overt rebellion, in a world that tries to indoctrinate women into believing that their position in this society is a privilege and an honor, actively resisting oppression in her own head is a nuanced and complex form of agency, because she consciously chooses to resist and reject the subjectivity that is thrust upon her.

2.2 Sexual pleasure: novel, graphic novel, and television series

While Offred uses her voice to exercise agency in different ways, she also exercises agency through sexual pleasure to extend beyond the mandated reproductive role she must fulfill, which renders her a “two-legged womb, that’s all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices” (Atwood 1985,136). By referring to her reproductive duty as a “two-legged womb,” she suggests that her only function in society is to try to produce children (Atwood 1985, 136). The image of “vessels” and “chalices” (Atwood 1985, 136) evokes what Luce Irigaray discusses in “The Sex Which is Not One,” where she mentions that “the vagina is valued for the ‘lodging’ it offers the male organ when the forbidden hand has to find a replacement for pleasure-giving” (1997, 248). She implies that in society male biology is conceptualized as superior, whereas female biology is inferior and exists for male pleasure. Irigaray goes on to imply that society conditions individuals to believe that the vagina is a space for the man to fill, which suggests that Offred is empty and exists purely for producing children. Furthermore, discussion of sex for women in dystopian texts predominantly indicates that it is a mechanism of escape rather than agency. Sargent and

Sargisson argue that “sex can take us a long way, but it cannot get us where we want to go,” and as such, sex is not a means to becoming an active agent because it does not make a difference in challenging society (Sargent and Sargisson 2014, 316). However, in a feminist dystopian text, it is a feminist and empowering notion when female protagonists seek out sexual pleasure and assert their sexuality, which liberates them emotionally and even physically from the reproductive function they are being asked to perform. While sexual pleasure and sexuality do not enable these women to escape from the dystopian regimes that oppress them, I argue that it provides them with an emotional and physical catharsis from the oppression and subjugation they experience, which empowers them to survive gender-based oppression, reclaim their sexuality, and subvert the patriarchal expectation that they only exist for reproduction.

In addition, as Atwood mentioned during a roundtable discussion at the Université de Rouen, “if the regime forbids love affairs, then one of the most rebellious things that you can do is have one” (Weiss 2009, 122-123). By continuing her sexual relationship and emotional affair with the Commander’s servant, Nick, Offred can subvert her prescribed reproductive role and redeem her sexual identity. After Serena Joy prompts Offred to have sex with Nick to increase her chances of conceiving a child, Offred explains, “I went back to Nick. Time after time, on my own, without Serena knowing [...] I did not do it for him, but for myself entirely. I didn’t even think of it as giving myself to him [...] I did not feel munificent, but thankful” (Atwood 1985, 268). As an act of defiance and resistance, Offred visits Nick repeatedly to have sex without the permission or knowledge of Serena Joy; this decision to have consensual sex is a choice she makes on her own for sexual pleasure. Offred is explicit about not feeling like an object or gift in this sexual exchange, but thankful she can choose to have consensual sex, which makes her feel like a person and “feel more in control” because it allows her to exercise agency over her body (Atwood 1985, 269).

While Offred seeks sex with Nick to gain control over her own body in *The Handmaid’s Tale* novel, the focus is on the control *and* resulting comfort she receives from the relationship with Nick in the graphic novel. In Fig. 3, Offred establishes the terms of their relationship when she asserts, “No romance. Okay?” (Atwood 2019). By separating the statement (“no romance”) from the question (“Okay?”), Offred establishes herself as the one with the power to wield the contractual parameters of their relationship because she is the offeror and he is the offeree (Atwood 2019). If Nick wants to engage in a sexual relationship with her, he has to agree not to act romantically because those are her terms. Since he implicitly agrees to her terms, there is undoubtedly a sense of comfort that follows, which is not demonstrated through words, but through their embrace and the look of relief on her face, an aspect emphasized in the graphic

novel that is not in the novel. The tightness of the panel, which focuses on just their modestly intertwined bodies, demonstrates that Offred can use this moment to escape her reality as a “two-legged womb” (Atwood 1985, 136). Not only can she escape her prescribed reproductive role, but Nault constructs the image to deny fetishizing. She can, essentially, cut out anything that happens outside of what occurs with Nick; as a result, it gives her an additional layer of comfort and control that makes her an active agent in her own life.



Fig. 3: Offred and Nick

Unlike the novel and graphic novel, *The Handmaid's Tale* television series handles the sexual relationship in very different terms. As Laura Adamczyk et al. contend about the episode, “Faithful,” it focuses on “Offred’s reception to sex in a variety of forms,” such as her “sweet but illicit courtship with her to-be husband.” “[W]e discover that she likes being on top,” which represents a time when June, not Offred, was free to have consensual and pleasurable sex (Adamczyk et al. 2017). This moment is then juxtaposed with two prescribed sexual encounters in present-day Gilead: the first is the ceremony where the “Commander touch[es] her thigh” and “attempt[s] to inject pleasure for himself into the sterile and abusive ritual,” while the second is with Nick and “it’s under the watch of Serena Joy” and “it’s procedural” (Adamczyk et al. 2017). The prescribed sexual encounters, along with not being able to say no to Serena Joy’s

request that she have sex with Nick, reinforces how little agency Offred has over her own body and pleasure, which is why the ongoing relationship she has with Nick is so crucial because “they engage in a relationship on their own terms” (Adamczyk et al. 2017). In a world where Offred has been denied her rights to her body, pleasure, and subjectivity for so long, it is an act of agency to continue a sexual relationship with Nick because for “Offred it’s a moment where she is finally in control. This is sex that she chooses to have. She orchestrates the removal of clothing. The camera is trained on her face. It’s a reclamation” (Adamczyk et al. 2017).

While the sexual relationship does not result in an overturning of the Gileadean government, it is enough to free June’s, not Offred’s, soul. She is entirely in charge of this relationship, which the camera makes evident by remaining on her face, rather than on objectifying or eroticizing her body, continuing to obscure the male gaze.⁸ In addition, her moans of pleasure from being on top are central, rather than Nick’s, which is different from the ceremony scenes with the Commander, where his sexual satisfaction is key. Through this relationship that focuses on Offred’s control and pleasure, viewers understand that it allows her to (re)claim agency over her body and sexuality through extremely passionate sex, which is not necessarily evident in the novel or graphic novel because those media are void of sound.⁹ As such, the television series is able to augment the passion in the sexual relationship between Offred and Nick with sound and sensual movement in order to reinforce the agency Offred gains from this relationship, and ultimately, its value for her.

3. Beyond Offred: women’s diverse resistance to gender-based oppression in Hulu’s television adaptation of *The Handmaid’s Tale*

Since the novel and graphic novel is written in the first-person, the reader is limited to just Offred’s perspective and experiences, which provides a very narrow scope of how women experience oppression and exercise agency against that oppression. In *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, Audre Lorde challenges one of Virginia Woolf’s central claims in *A Room of One’s Own* by pointing out that “A room of one’s own may be a necessity for writing prose, but so are

⁸ See Mulvey 1975.

⁹ As obvious as it is that sound is important in cinematic media, it is exceedingly important because the Hulu adaptation of *The Handmaid’s Tale* is the first cinematic remake since the disastrous 1990 film adaptation (*The Handmaid’s Tale*, Volker Schlöndorff). While the relationship with Nick is intended to be liberating for Offred, the relationship is still about pleasing the man who is on top of her. At the end of the film, when Offred does escape, she almost chooses not to because she will have to leave Nick behind. The sexual relationship in the film is not as progressive as the relationship in the television series also *because of* the sounds of sexual pleasure made by Offred.

reams of paper, a typewriter, and plenty of time;” this suggests that a room and money empowered Woolf to write as a financially stable white woman, but that is not necessarily true for all women (1984, 116). Lorde implies that Woolf’s assertion is liberating to her as a white woman who is financially secure, but it might not be liberating to many other women who might never have a room, time, or the tools to write in the manner Woolf prescribes. This is why all women need to be more inclusive of the wider range in experiences when they make claims about what women need and want, or how they are subjected to and resist that oppression. Offred’s ordeal is not the universal experience of what it is like to be a woman in Gilead, which she makes clear in the novel by distinguishing her subjectivity from Moira’s. For example, in a memory featuring Moira from the time before, readers find out that the latter is a lesbian.¹⁰ Like Offred, she is being conditioned to have sex with a Commander during a ceremony every month, but unlike Offred, Moira experiences an additional level of oppression by being forced to have sex with a man when she is not heterosexual. Even though both women are subjected forcibly to the same situation, Offred and Moira also experience gender-based oppression in disparate ways. While the novel hints at the notion that women are oppressed and exercise agency differently, the first-person perspective seems to disallow Atwood from extending this beyond Offred’s point of view in the novel and graphic novel.

However, as Ani Bundel points out, “on-screen adaptations allow audiences to get to know other characters independently, as opposed to just Offred’s point of view, which is not something afforded on the page” (2018). Unlike the novel and graphic novel, the television adaptation does focus on Offred, but Hulu is able to extend beyond her perspective as well. Eliana Dockterman interviewed Margaret Atwood and Elizabeth Moss, who plays June/Offred in Hulu’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, about the broadened scope of the series. Moss was asked, “Why did you add more nonwhite, non-straight characters?” and Moss replied, “We wanted the show to be very relatable. We wanted people to see themselves in it. If you’re going to do that, you have to show all types of people. You have to reflect current society” (Dockterman 2017). This suggests that the Hulu adaptation of *The Handmaid’s Tale* endeavors to reflect contemporary society, which places a more conscious effort providing an intersectional narrative¹¹ where every woman is oppressed, but they are also not oppressed equally within Gilead. The television series is the ideal medium for accomplishing this because one episode leads into the next and the story is told over ten episodes that are fifty to sixty minutes long, which allows for more room for the

¹⁰ During a conversation in the time before The Republic of Gilead was formed, Offred reports to readers that Moira “decided to prefer women” (Atwood 1985,172).

¹¹ For detailed information on intersectionality, see (Crenshaw 1991).

development of characters other than Offred. While length can certainly be developed in a novel, the medium of the television series is the only transmedia adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale* that is able to focus so much on a variety of women. In the novel, Atwood made the choice to write it in first person, which makes it difficult to focus on other women's agency or point of view. The difference in adaptations ultimately encourages users to consider the diverse ways that women exercise agency when viewers watch the television series as opposed to reading the novel.

3.1 *Emily*

Throughout the television series, there are moments of illicit conversation that are exchanged between handmaids, and specifically, reveal the differences between women. Emily—who is Offred's walking partner, Ofglen—also had a family (a wife and a son), but she must conceal the fact that she is a lesbian because the Gileadean society considers homosexuality blasphemous and reserves certain punishment, such as female genital mutilation, for those who commit 'gender treachery.' For example, Emily slept with another woman, a Martha, and was arrested, tried, forced to watch her lover die by hanging. Finally, she underwent enforced, non-consensual, female genital mutilation surgery at the end of season one, episode three. After this, she was placed at a different Commander's house and became Ofsteven. After all this has happened, there is a moment when Emily is standing at a market, sees a car door open, and she hops in. Alexis Bledel, who plays Ofglen/Emily/Ofsteven in the series, commented on this moment in an interview:

She's standing there, having experienced such a devastating loss. She's still processing all that's happened to her even though some time has passed. Then she sees this car door open, and she decides to jump in. She doesn't know where she's going or how far she'll be able to go, but once she realizes the other handmaids are watching—and it's making a statement to the guards—she decides to keep going as long as she can. (Sperling 2017)

According to Bledel, this is a moment where Emily (re)claims her agency by making her anger at the government evident. It is a conscious act of rebellion, which not only results in the death of one of the guards that she runs over and kills, but it also seems to inspire and unite the handmaids, demonstrating that they are not helpless and without agency. This moment offers Emily respite and even reclamation of her subjectivity but results in the Gileadean government sending her to the Colonies. While being sent to the Colonies is Moira and Offred/June's worst

nightmare, it is not Emily's, which demonstrates that it is up to each individual woman to decide the parameters of the way in which she exercises agency and challenges patriarchal society.

3.2 *Moira*

Unlike Emily, a character who is not present in *The Handmaid's Tale* novel or the graphic novel, Moira is present in all adaptations; however, the purpose of her character in the novel and graphic novel is to hint at the difference in oppression that LGBTQA *and* women of color experience and to empower Offred to find her own way to resist. For example, in the novel, the narrative Offred constructs about Moira is the opposite of her own: it is aggressive and clever because Moira dresses up as an Aunt and finds some compassionate Quakers to aid her in her attempted escape. Even though she does not succeed, the narrative Offred chooses to tell revolves around resistance and resilience, which seems to give her hope and a reason to keep surviving. At the end of the recounting, Offred notes:

Here is what I'd like to tell. I'd like to tell a story about how Moira escaped, for good this time. Or if I couldn't tell that, I'd like to say she blew up Jezebel's, with fifty Commanders inside it. I'd like her to end with something daring and spectacular, some outrage, something that would befit her. But as far as I know that didn't happen. I don't know how she ended, or even if she did, because I never saw her again. (Atwood 1985, 250)

Offred cannot weave a narrative of victory and destruction of corrupt patriarchal power because she does not know if it has happened or not; however, in between the lines, it is implied that even if these brave feats are not possible, or even remotely true, it still brings Offred some solace and comfort to entertain the possibility that Moira has escaped or caused irreparable damage to the Gileadean government.

While the novel and graphic novel include Moira's story, the television series format empowers Moira (played by Samira Wiley) to be her own character rather than a memory that helps Offred not to give up. In the television series, Moira was considered to be too obstinate for the job of a handmaid, so they gave her a choice: either to go to the Colonies or to be a sex worker in the club, Jezebels. In *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Patricia Hill Collins claims there are "negative stereotypes" that are "attached to Black women," such as portraying them as hypersexual jezebels, which is "fundamental to Black women's oppression" and demonstrates that gender, class, and race intersect to specifically discriminate against Black women in a way that could never affect white women (2000,7). Both Moira and Emily have reputations of being openly rebellious, and too dangerous

to have around; however, the Gileadean government tries to rehabilitate Emily and (re)integrate her into society as a handmaid, but they do not do the same with Moira, which seems to suggest that white women are the preferred breeding stock, while Black women will suffice as sex workers. In other words, the Gileadean government not only forces Moira into a hypersexualized object position that is exclusively tailored toward Black women. Her costume—a short pair of pink shorts in a satin fabric and a white blouse with no bra that makes her nipples very visible through the flimsy fabric—and the camera angles that are wide and capture her full body allows the men in the club to capitalize on the misogynistic and racist implications of this coerced position for their own benefit. This puts into perspective for users that oppression takes different forms for different women.

Unlike other adaptations of *The Handmaid's Tale*, the television series also allows for a more capacious storyline for Moira in terms of how she (re)claims and exercises her agency. When June and Moira reconnect in Jezebels, June asks Moira for help, but she refuses to take the risk. While users might want Moira to help June, this moment serves as a reminder that women exercise agency in different ways and on their own terms—that is, the fact that Moira stands up for herself and does not bend to the will of her friend is a significant moment because white women often do not consider the negative implications of their actions on Black women. Even though Moira refuses initially, she empowers herself into a position where she is comfortable with attempting escape again, and as she does, she is able to carry out the task for June, but only because she put her needs first. This moment serves as a reminder that Black women should not have to sacrifice their own needs and desires for the sake of other women. In addition to exercising agency for her own benefit, Moira also exercises agency in additional seasons by choosing to resist Gilead's mechanisms of oppression from the outside in order to help other women who have not yet escaped. Adding in this notion to *The Handmaid's Tale*, which is not in the original novel or graphic novel, reinforces that agency can happen in a variety of ways.¹²

4. Conclusion

When discussing a narrative that has been adapted from one medium to another, Hutcheon explains that this gives an adaptation a “double nature” that often prompts viewers to evaluate

¹² Since *The Handmaid's Tale* television series is ongoing, Margaret Atwood works very closely with the Hulu television series production team. In fact, Miller has stated, “I had to be careful about where I was going and what I was doing. She controls the world” (Alter 2019). This demonstrates that the variations and changes across the transmedia franchise are, in fact, adding to the *The Handmaid's Tale* narrative in interesting and important ways.

the adaptation on its “proximity or fidelity” to the original source text, which she argues should not “be the criterion of judgment or the focus of analysis” (2013, 6). When juxtaposing transmedia adaptations of a text, users gain more by exploring what the divergences mean, rather than focusing on how they are or are not faithful to the original source text. While the basic components of Atwood’s original *The Handmaid’s Tale* novel are there, each adaptation has its own unique mission, which contributes a new understanding of the themes and characters. A direct juxtaposition of transmedia adaptations of *The Handmaid’s Tale* demonstrates that women experience gender-based oppression and exercise agency against it in different ways, which prompts users to think more critically about what it takes to subvert patriarchal control. As such, the feminist dystopian genre and *The Handmaid’s Tale* is not just entertainment. There are rhetorical implications that are integral and applicable to real-world feminist resistance and social justice. By examining the many subtle and nuanced ways in which women can exercise agency against patriarchal control, real-world women are empowered to see the value of their own voices and personal experiences—for *The Handmaid’s Tale* is a reminder that agency is possible from the margins of society.

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